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ABSTRACT

This booklet is one of a series of teacher-written curriculum publications launched by the Bay Area Writing Project, each focusing on a different aspect of the teaching of composition. Step-by-step directions are provided to develop small writing response groups in any junior high or high school classroom, whether English, science, or social studies. The steps described include preparing for small group response sessions, establishing response groups, using transcribed examples of small group response, evaluating response group work, and coping with problems that may occur in small group work. (AEA)

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Using Student Writing Response Groups in the Classroom

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12. *Using Student Writing Response Groups in the Classroom* by Mary K. Healy
    Outlines the steps a teacher might take to teach students to respond in a helpful way to each other's writing and discusses how to handle problems which may occur in small group work.

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Although this monograph is written in the first person about processes I use to develop small writing response groups in my classes, I want to credit, with much appreciation, both the environment in which these methods evolved and my colleagues who participated with me in that evolution. I taught for twelve years on the seventh and eighth grade humanities team at Del Mar and Reedland Woods Schools in the Reed Union School District, Marin County, California, whose administration over the years provided a most supportive and encouraging environment, particularly the following superintendents and principals: Robert Gaw, Ralph Giovanniello, John Fitch, Robert Gowan, Frank Raney and Robert Kreischer. For the last four of those years, I was privileged to team teach with Cathy Schengel: many of the ideas and strategies in this booklet resulted from our collaboration. Finally, I would like to thank my other teaching colleagues in Reed District: Nancy van Ravenswaay, Phyllis Root, Joyce Wilson, and Louise Kleinsorge Williams, all of whom helped to sustain my belief in writing as a process of learning.

Preface

In recent years James Moffett, Ken Macrorie, Peter Elbow and others have written enthusiastically about the benefits composition students derive from the practice of working together in small groups to respond to one another's writing; to become, in effect, each other's teachers. Too often, however, teachers who are not accustomed to working with small groups in their classrooms try the method and soon abandon it as unproductive.

As Mary K. Healy points out in this monograph, using student response groups successfully takes time, patience, careful planning, and training of students unfamiliar with the process. Mary K. outlines the steps she has developed to make writing response groups work and discusses how to handle problems which may occur when teachers first begin to use the method. Her paper is a significant contribution to the literature on this subject and should encourage teachers who see the potential value in student response groups to persevere in using them.

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University of California, Berkeley

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Introduction

Teachers of any subject have an implicit or explicit picture of students who are successful in their area. Below is my description of successful writing students:

1. They begin writing without debilitating trepidation and anxiety.
2. They realize that they will make discoveries about the subject through the act of writing.
3. They take into account the purpose and audience for the writing.
4. They realize from past experience that the development of the paper will progress through drafts.
5. They have the confidence to use personal anecdote or experience to illuminate arguments.
6. If circumstances allow, they try out the paper on others; if not, they try to imagine the intended audience.
7. They know that the writing will be difficult, frustrating work but proceed anyway.

I believe that involving students in small writing response groups between drafts of writing in the classroom—any classroom whether English, science, social studies, etc.—provides the context for developing the characteristics listed above. The basic premise behind this use of small groups is that, to provide a student writer with a sense of audience, he must receive audience reactions *while engaged* in the process of writing, not at the end when the paper has been handed in, days have gone by, and the piece is handed back, minutely evaluated by the teacher. In order for the writer to develop that automatic awareness of a reader's needs which is characteristic of most professional writers, the student needs frequently to try out works in progress on other members of the class for some kind of clarifying response. This essay outlines a process for developing student ability to work effectively in response groups.

I use the term "response group" rather than "editing," "proofreading," or "writing" group to place emphasis on the active involvement of group members—giving reactions, asking questions, making suggestions. The

words "proofreading" or "editing" imply making corrections near the end of the composing process. *To respond* is more immediate; it occurs earlier in the writing process—usually after a first draft has been completed.

The use of student response groups in the classroom is an effective means both to enable students to help each other with their writing and to lessen the paper load for the conscientious teacher who believes students learn to write by writing. By encouraging students to listen and respond to each other's written work, the teacher achieves a variety of useful purposes: students develop a sense of a responsive, questioning audience; students are helped with their writing while it is *in progress;* students develop a sense of writing as a process which involves revising based on reclarification of their ideas and purposes; and students help each other eliminate many of the errors which block the reader's comprehension.

Students of any age bring a wealth of knowledge about language to the classroom. Whatever their previous school experience, students have been using and learning language for years. In addition, many of them are out-of-school readers with sensitivity to language often not acknowledged in the classroom. Just living a life requires language awareness and comprehension skills rarely mentioned in textbooks. All of these language skills are brought into play when students respond to each other's writing in small groups.

From systematically using small response groups in the classroom, I have noted the following evolving characteristics in student writing: more specificity of detail, more supporting examples, more transitional and introductory phrases directed at the reader, and, as a consequence of a combination of the above, more fluent and complete pieces of writing. After a year's work with response groups in the classroom, students generally *request* time for group work when they are between drafts of a particular piece of writing. Slowly, over the course of the year, they begin to regard response groups as useful to them in a variety of ways. They can read their papers aloud to an attentive audience; they discover that in the act of reading aloud, they themselves hear omissions in their papers, awkward word choices, run-on sentences, sentence fragments, ambiguous sections, etc. It becomes common for a student reading a paper out loud to stop, reread a phrase, and make a change before moving on to the next line. "That doesn't sound right" is a frequent reaction of the writer upon a first reading aloud. "I forgot to tell you about the part when..." or "There's something missing here" are other common reactions by writers to their own work. These *writer* reactions occur even before the small group begins to respond to the piece.

Preparation for Small Group Response Sessions

THE CLASSROOM CONTEXT

Students' attitudes toward writing shape the type of comments they make about each other's writing in small groups. In large part, those attitudes were formed by past experiences with writing, both at home and in school. And, since writing is generally considered a school-related activity, it is probable that the attitudes and values students have developed toward both the writing process and its eventual product were shaped by their *school* experience. The experiences each student has had depend upon decisions made by previous teachers.

- What have these teachers valued in the student's writing?
- How did these teachers respond to the writing—with letter grades alone? With mechanical corrections? With comments? With a combination of these?
- What model of the writing process did the teacher work from?
  a. That a piece of writing has stages of development—a gradual movement from first draft to last, with plenty of time to try out the draft on others in between?
  b. That a piece of writing should be evaluated and corrected first and *then* the student begins to revise and rewrite?
- What types of comments did the teachers make about completed pieces of writing?
  a. Did they focus on the weaknesses in the writing and discuss plans for remediation?
  b. Did they read some strong selections aloud for the enjoyment of the class and make brief comments on why the examples were strong?
- Did the teachers seem to *enjoy* the writing of their students?
- Did the teachers themselves write and share some of this writing with their students?
- How much "play" with language went on in class?

The attitudes of student writers in our classes now are the sum of all that has happened to their writing in the past. The teacher who wants small groups to function successfully in the classroom will spend some

time before starting group work both ferreting out the origins of present attitudes and taking actions to shape new ones if existing attitudes are constricting or counter-productive. I use the following activity for that purpose:

Practice

Early in the year or the semester, I assign students the topic "Writing in School." In a pre-writing discussion, I ask about their earliest memories of writing in school—how they learned to form letters and words, what early topics they remember writing about, how they felt at the time about the writing they did, how teachers responded to their writing, what specific lessons they remember being taught, and, finally, how they go about writing something. Then they are asked to write about these individual experiences.

When this initial assignment has been handed in, I generally read and write responses to it—commenting on the content, asking questions when they occur naturally. I ignore mechanical or structural flaws because the purpose here is to elicit from students a description of their current stance toward writing along with information about how that attitude developed over time.

After reading and responding to the papers, I usually comment to the class about various attitudes the writing revealed, and then I read several selections aloud.

Following an activity such as this, I describe what I value in my students' writing and how classroom activities for the rest of the year will reflect that attitude. Specifically, I describe writing as a process made up of *stages* so that it is not necessary for all writing done in class to be polished into final draft form. I talk briefly about the importance of trying out writing on an *audience* before preparing a final draft, to learn how readers hear the words. I refer to my written comments on their papers as an example of the *reactions* of a reader rather than the *corrections* of an evaluator. Then I stop talking, knowing, as always, that my actions in the classroom rather than my talk about the process will be the ultimate persuasion.

For the next two weeks or so, we do many short "originals" or first draft writings on a variety of topics—reactions to the literature we read, reactions to TV and books, memory pieces about the students' childhoods, descriptions of scenes around the school or specific school situations. I read all of these, write comments or ask questions, and the papers are filed in the students' individual writing folders along with the rest of their writing. These folders remain in the classroom, either in boxes or file cabinets.

THE STUDENTS' SENSE OF LANGUAGE

If students have had no previous work in response groups, I find it necessary to encourage them to become conscious of how they respond to language they hear and read. What do they like or dislike? Often, they have never been asked that question in school before, so at first they have no immediate answer. Unless they *can* respond, they cannot function effectively in a small group because they have nothing concrete to offer a writer.

One way of making students aware of effective writing is frequently to reproduce selections from student journals or other first draft writing, have students read these anonymous selections aloud, in turn, and then have each student underline any word, phrase, sentence, or passage which she particularly likes, for whatever reason. Each person in the class, including the teacher, selects something to read aloud. Repeating the same words someone else has read is encouraged because the purpose of the lesson is to call attention to effective use of language, and repetition emphasizes the most effective language in each piece. Below are some examples from eighth grade student journals. The underlinings were made by other students in the class and the adjacent numbers indicate how many students in the room read that particular line.

> My mind, as stupid as it is, is just right for me. If it wasn't it wouldn't be on my head. My mind seems to have a short memory, but is quite good at figuring things out. That is why I am the worlds worst speller and a semi-good mathematician. The only things that stay on my mind are girls, soccer and work, not that I like work, but just that I am so far behind in it I can't get it off my mind. (5) At night my mind is still at work keeping me awake.

* * * * * * * * * * *

> When I think of my mind I think of a room filled with little gears, motors, wires and tubes. The gears and motors make my body function and the wires and tubes absorb information and knowledge. When I hit my head a tube gets broken or a gear gets jammed and I get a headache, but it always repairs itself. When someone dies from a head injury, I think of it as if they broke all the motors and tubes in their head. I think of skin as a gooey substance that is poured on and dries and then provides a little protection for the insides. (4)

* * * * * * * * * * *

> On cold rainy mornings, I am so cold. I can't even get out of bed. I'm like a cold and stiff nail stuck in a block of ice. (4) Then I wait until someone turns on the heat, then my room gets warm I begin to defrost and slowly get out of bed.

• • • • • • • • • •

Today all I have done is rush. When I got up in the morning I had to rush. To get my work done in class I had to rush and immediately when I got home I started to rush and now I am rushing to do this original. When I was told to do an original on a rambling thought I tried and tried to ramble but I couldn't so I thought. I thought and thought but I couldn't ramble. (3) Then I had to rush so I never ended up rambling.

This activity, repeated once or twice a week, accustoms the students to listen for effective use of language and to individually choose their own preferences. They grow in confidence about their ability to recognize strong writing; they no longer feel they must wait for the teacher's final judgment. When they are at ease with this activity, I usually begin the first stages of small group work.

THE WHOLE CLASS AS A RESPONSE GROUP

Deciding just when to begin response groups is crucial. Beginning too early in the year or the semester is counter-productive because it takes time for students to become more fluent writers. I usually wait until after students have been writing original drafts for about one month and then introduce the idea of working in small response groups before they write their final drafts. Over the years, I have accumulated audio and video tapes of group work by my previous classes. I play several excerpts to introduce the process, asking students to comment afterwards on what they hear and see.

Via Overhead Projector Transparency

Next I plan a whole class writing assignment, usually a childhood memory piece. When the first drafts are completed, I choose several papers to reproduce on transparencies for class response. Before working with the transparencies, however, I emphasize to the students the difference between *evaluation* and *response:*

Evaluation: The final assessment of a finished piece of written work which has already gone through drafts. Final evaluation will be the teacher's responsibility.

Response: The initial reaction to a piece of first draft writing, usually in the form of questions to the writer about the content or form of the piece. Response will be the responsibility of the students and the teacher.

After reading the piece aloud, I have the students respond to the writing on the transparency by asking questions about the writing. Then I write the

students' questions on the transparency next to the appropriate line, repeating the procedure with each of the transparencies. The session ends with students exchanging their own papers with a partner and writing questions which occur to them about each other's papers.

Via Ditto

Within several days of the overhead transparency response lesson, I plan another whole class writing assignment, again a personal narrative piece—perhaps based on the memory of a childhood fear or a frightening experience. Then I choose several of the original drafts and run off dittoed copies of them exactly as written, after asking the writers' permission. I ask the students to write responses, either questions or comments, directly on the dittoed sheets and hand them in to me so that I see how they are responding to each other's work. I comment on the type of response each student is offering and try to indicate whether it would be helpful to the writer. The written responses are a useful indication of the students' understanding of the process, and they alert me to students who will need further encouragement and direction.

THE MODEL SMALL GROUP

After completing the overhead transparency and ditto response sessions, I find it helpful to have one or two "live" sessions with a group of students or teachers responding to one another's writing in front of the rest of the class. For example, my team teaching partner and I often role play different types of response to our writing, attempting to illustrate the spectrum of response possibilities:

1. Useless: "Oh, your story is O.K." (No specific help for the writer)
2. Marginally useful: "I thought the part about your brother throwing spinach was funny." (Encouragement for the writer)
3. Useful: "How old was your brother when that happened?" (The writer learns what information the reader needs.)
4. Very useful: "I was confused when you said your aunt came in. I thought you said earlier that you were alone in the house." (Again, the writer hears from someone who *wasn't* there when it happened, someone who needs more information.)

Establishing Response Groups

DETERMINING GROUP MEMBERSHIP

There are many ways of arranging small groups in the classroom. Some teachers arrange groups by "ability" levels, believing that students of similar writing ability can respond more helpfully to one another's work. Other teachers attempt to include students of varying abilities in a group in order to provide written pieces of varying quality for response. Finally, some teachers use a "psychological" method, attempting to secure a harmonious balance of personalities in the group. I have tried all of these and abandoned them one by one. Now I just say, "Please get into groups of between two and five" and wait to see what happens. What usually happens is that students sit with their friends. In my experience, this arrangement allows for maximum participation by group members and maximum involvement with one another's writing.

However, using this friendship method of grouping is messy at first. One group is too large—the students huddle in a protective bunch of seven to nine or so. Individual students wander around the room, groupless. A group in the corner, ostensibly arranging furniture in a circle, shoves their chairs into one another's and the noise is growing. A typical beginning. At this point, I simply split the large group in two and quiet the noisy ones by joining their group. Dealing with students who have no group is more delicate, and what I do depends on the individual, the day, and the amount of tact and sensitivity I can muster. Usually, I request one of the groups to accept a student. If that doesn't seem feasible, then I arrange to work individually with the student until an appropriate group can be found.

PHYSICALLY ARRANGING THE ROOM

To control noise, I try to arrange the groups so they are physically as far apart as possible. I use corners of the room, the area around my desk, the outside corridor—whatever space is available. Movable furniture is, of course, a great advantage. But whatever the arrangement, the room will be noticeably noisy; this is natural. To control the noise, I discuss appropriate noise levels with students and ask members of a group to raise their hands when their concentration is disturbed. When hands go up, I usually ask for general quiet and point out the disturbance. If a particular group is consistently louder than others, I might join that group to settle

it down, disband it if it is simply not functioning, or find an isolated spot for it (perhaps a corridor, a stair landing near the room, or an adjoining empty classroom).

Just before the end of the first small group session, I usually call the whole class back together and we discuss the procedure. Examples of helpful response from partners are quoted, writers mention things they noticed about their own pieces, and any problems are discussed. If the small groups are scheduled to continue the next day, I review this discussion before they begin again.

USING CHECKLISTS AS GUIDES TO THE PROCESS

At each stage of the small group process, I find using short checklists quite helpful for guiding student progress. The following list of small group procedures is either written on the board before each session or dittoed and stapled to the students' writing folders:

Working in Small Groups

1. Keep the groups small—two to five at first.
2. Sit as far away as possible from other groups for noise control.
3. Write the names of your response partners on the top of your original draft.
4. After hearing a paper read, ask the writer any questions which occur to you. The writer will note those questions on the paper.
5. Encourage the writer to ask for help with difficult sections of his/her paper.
6. Make all revisions on your original draft before doing the final. Staple both copies together.

Then, during the first few months of work in small response groups, I usually ditto a checklist for each assignment that is to be revised into final draft form. The students find these checklists to be helpful reminders of the steps in the process, and I find that they eliminate much correction time for me. I am not constantly writing reminder notes on student papers and can concentrate my comments on the content of each paper. Two sample checklists follow:

1. **I Remember Assignment (English Class):**

I Remember

Name _____
Date _____

	Excellent	*Satisfactory*	*Needs improvement*
I Original Draft			
A. Partner's names appear on top.			
B. Response suggestions noted on paper.			
C. Writer shows revision on paper.			
II. Final Draft			
A. Correct heading on on paper.			
B. Written in ink, skipping lines.			
C. Used specific detail to make memory clear to reader.			
D. Correct use of spelling and punctuation.			

Teacher's Comment:

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2. **Middle Ages Role Play Assignment (Social Studies):**

Name _____
Section _____
Date _____
Response partners _____
_____

Social Studies
Written Role Play

	Partners	*Teacher*
I. Content		
A. Writer included factual details about		
1. Geographical location of housing	_____	_____
2. Family members and friends	_____	_____
3. Job and position in society	_____	_____
4. Favorite activities and possessions	_____	_____
5. Effects of religion on life	_____	_____
II. Presentation		
A. Successfully assumed the role of a Middle Ages person	_____	_____
B. Uses Middle Ages terms correctly	_____	_____
C. Successfully proof read paper (eliminated any spelling and punctuation errors)	_____	_____

Comments:

MONITORING RESPONSE GROUP PROGRESS

Keeping track of seven or eight small groups operating simultaneously in a classroom can be a frustrating experience, especially when the students are new to the process and seem to need the teacher's attention continually. However, over the years my team teaching partners and I have evolved several methods for remaining in touch with the groups' progress.

Sitting in on Response Groups

Once the groups are functioning and individual problems have been dealt with, I try to sit in on as many groups as possible during a 45 minute class period, staying with a group for at least the reading of one paper and the subsequent discussion of it. This participation allows me to contribute to the response and to note the responses others are making. As soon as possible after the class period, I make brief notes in an anecdotal record book about my observations in the groups. Reviewing these notes periodically also helps me balance my time between groups, an important detail when one has five or six different classes per day.

Audio or Video Taping of Response Groups

In addition to sitting in on groups, I try to have three or four tape recorders distributed around the room to tape the proceedings. Generally, I use small, inexpensive cassette recorders, either the school's or borrowed from students. I request that the students keep the recorders on during their entire session, including inevitable digressions from the writing at hand. Then, in whatever spare time is available—usually in the car driving back and forth to school—I listen briefly to each tape, running it ahead until I find something of particular interest to play back to the class. I listen especially for extremes—excellent, sustained response to a particular piece, or inattentive, non-helpful comments. The next day I play sections back to the class, asking for their reactions and giving my own. And I also enter my comments and evaluation of the tapes in my anecdotal record book.

From time to time, I arrange to have response groups video-taped, and then the whole class participates in playback discussion sessions. The key point here is only to videotape volunteer groups; otherwise, self-consciousness and resentment get in the way of the group process. As mentioned earlier, I often use videotapes of past group sessions to introduce the small group response process to new classes.

Noting Revision from Original to Final Draft

Another method of monitoring the progress of individual response groups is to examine closely the revisions made from original to final

draft. Students are required to hand in all drafts of papers with the final draft on top. I urge them to skip lines on their papers and make visible as many of their revisions as possible, as well as writing down the questions or comments made by their response partners. I find it takes very little time to scan the first draft, noting the suggestions and revisions, before closely reading the final draft. And the contrast (or lack of contrast) between the drafts serves as the basis of my comments to the student. As I worked with groups over the years, it became clear to me that if I wanted students to take responsibility for responding to other writers' papers and for revising their own, I must make both response and revision the focus of my continual evaluation of student progress. If I find no revision apparent between drafts of a paper which clearly needs it, then I immediately return the paper to the student before evaluating it *and* call over the student's response partners for a conference about their responsibility to the writer.

Another method of monitoring which has been suggested to me, although I have not tried it, is to ask members of a response group periodically to write comments to the teacher about the strong and weak aspects of their group's work.

Using Examples of Small Group Response

From time to time, when a particularly interesting exchange takes place, I transcribe a tape or section of a tape to share with students or other teachers as an illustration of the benefits of small group work. The two excerpts and one full transcript which follow are typical of those that I have duplicated in the past. They reveal students who are intent on clarifying what the writer was attempting to say. All are unedited, reproduced just as they occurred. I include them here as examples of response groups in action.

Excerpt from Transcript I

In the following excerpt, three eighth grade girls discuss a paper. The response partners (B and C) not only ask the writer (A) for clarification of terminology, but also suggest the form for revision.

A. (Eighth grade student who is reading her paper about a Russian gymnast)
"...she is the only woman gymnast that can do a round-off double back somersault."
B. Well, wait a minute, wait. What's that?
A. You know how you do a round-off back semi?
B. No.
A. Well, a back flip in the air. A back flip in the air.
B. Oh, is that when you're on the small one, and you go back...
A. She can do, she can do: OK, you know what a round-off is, right?
B. Yeah.
A. You know how you do...you know how I do a back-hand spring? And I try and do it with no hands?
B. Yeah.
A. Well that's....
B. You mean you're doing, she's doing, she can do two flips in the air without touching the ground?
A. Right, back, up....
B. One thing you might do, cause like, some people don't really know, like us...so like try to explain, just say "doing two back flips without touching the ground," or something like that.

C. No, just write that down and then put in parentheses or dash, and then put it down, and after you write what it is, just put another dash.

Excerpt from Transcript II

This excerpt, also from a discussion by eighth grade girls, illustrates the involvement and concentration possible when partners are working well together. It is clear that the responder (A) has many questions about the situation (an elementary school drama production) her partner is describing, all of them forcing the writer toward more specificity of detail.

A. ...and write the rest of the word down here. It's hard to read it, and you could, you could explain here, when it says, "If I could face all the kids who were in my drama class, why couldn't I face anybody else?" You could say, were they, were they laughing at you?
B. No. Well, I don't know. I didn't want to hear any laughing, I was too embarassed to find out.
A. Well, where, I mean did you just stand there? Forever?
B. No, not forever. They didn't wait for me to say my lines. They just went on and said theirs. I couldn't blame them either.
A. Or did they just stop a second...
B. I just stood there like this, and about two, three seconds later they waited for me to say my lines, and then, they knew I wouldn't say them, and they, um, I just, I froze and then they said theirs. The two people behind me.
A. But did they say, like (in a whisper) "Michelle, this is your line," you know?
B. No.
A. (whisper) "Say this."
B. No, we weren't required to study any lines, like...we just had to make up our own. Because we didn't have many lines. The people who were standing, the eleven people...
A. So what do you mean? I mean, like, we could be doing a play right now, or something, and I could just...make up my own lines?
B. Yeah, that's right, as long as it has to do with the subject.

Transcript III

As an example of the entire process from first to final draft, I have included the following complete transcript of two seventh grade boys discussing a legend one has written. The session took place in late February; the boys had begun response group work the previous October. The transcript illustrates several important points about the benefits of small group work:

- The responder (J) asks many specific questions of the writer (T) who, in turn, increases the specificity of his final draft.
- Both boys become quite involved in the development of the legend. There is little extraneous talk and much concentration on the task at hand.
- By this time in the school year, the *process* of working in small groups has become natural to the students; they both exhibit great tact with each other and it is clear that they value each other's comments.

T. O.K. Let's do mine now.

J. O.K. Now starts yours off...now read it then I'll...

T. You want me to read it...do you want to read it?

J. No, first you read it to me and then I'll look at it.

T. The wind howled over the topmast and the ship rocked and crashed. The Pacific...

J. Wait. What's the...title? Do you have a title for it?

T. Oh, well. Oh, I'll get that later...The Pacific Queen humbled along ever so slowly in a hurricane off Australia. The captain, Taylor Hobson, barked his orders over the rushing wind, trying to dodge the Great Barrier Reef. Looming over the ship, a twenty foot wave swept over the ship. It rocked and creaked and scattered supplies all over the ship. The crew weren't worried where they were going because of the supplies thrown on the ship. While they were cleaning the mess, the ship snuck toward the reef. A jarring noise ripped the ship and put a huge hole in the ship. Taylor had a lifeboat lowered in the rough sea. The men scurried about the doomed ship for provisions to supply the long journey of the lifeboat. The men scampered down the side of the ship. The lifeboat swayed away from her berth. While the men jumped ...while the men jumped. The men jumped but most...but most never made the lifeboat. Yells of "Help" filled the air as the Pacific Queen went under. Left on her were two dozen men, a few provisions, and twenty-one people were lost--one of them Captain Taylor Hobson. Forty-one people survived. The lifeboats floated around the ship's last stand. Dazed, injured, surprised and scared, the men didn't know what to do. The lifeboats were battered and the big waves didn't help much. Three men were injured but they had no first aid. The first mate, Samuel Gold, took charge. He tried to lash the three boats together with rope. Two boats got lashed, but the

winds kept the lines from reaching the third boat. Night fell so fast that the men didn't notice until it was pitch black. The men couldn't sleep and the injured men groaned the night through. In the morning, Gold and the rest of the crew woke up to a terrible sight. Two of the three injured men had died in the middle of the night. Worst of all, the third boat was out of sight. Where was it? They couldn't follow it because they didn't know where it was...went. Morale was low; they thought they were going to die. Gold told the men that they wouldn't die and they would make it. Days passed. The morale grew because of Gold and his talks. The crew sang songs and took swims. The 23rd day...on the...23rd day... The 23rd day after the wreck they saw land. By night they landed. And it's not...I don't like my ending...Samuel Gold became a legend. See, I've got to write about the legend...a man...

J. Just say...um...Samuel Gold became famous for...well, after ...ok...after the...

T. Or I could just go...

J. ...after the story got out about the 23 men...

T. Yeah...

J. ...About the 23 men...

T. No, it's 40...oh, well...

J. The 45...whatever...After the story got out about how many men made it back and how Gold kinda led them back...

T. Yeah...

J. And kept their morale up and everything, you could say he became...

T. In the newspaper, how they...

J. famous in the country for...um...

T. his...

J. his achievement in getting...not losing...not losing his confidence...

T. Yeah...

J. And keeping up courage and...um...just knowing how to... do it...

T. Or I could say later he went back and put buoys or something, you know, to mark off...probably help the ship people, masters or whatever...

J. O.K.

T. O.K. Is it clear?

J. Yeah...

T. Could you understand it?

J. Yeah...it...like...it's just these...it was pretty...yeah...it wasn't boring. It was clear. I could understand it easily.

T. Yeah...but here I have the Pacific Queen, I got to say...

J. It was just...uh...

T. ...The Pacific Queen, a...like banana ship or a...

J. What kind of ship was it?

T. Yeah...

J. Like you got to say...

T. Yeah...

J. What was it doing? Like where was it going?

T. What...yeah...kind...

J. What was it...was it...a...uh...

T. Where...

J. Was it a tour ship? Was it a...

T. Yeah...

J. You know...like...

T. Yeah...

J. Did it have just men...or like...kind of like was it navy, army, or what?

T. Yeah...O.K....

J. Or was it a passenger ship?

T. But I think I should say more how they're...when they're in the lifeboats...I got to say more...

J. Yeah, say more...like you just...

T. Yeah, I know...

J. Talk about...like...um...what did they do? Did they have to eat anybody...like in *Survive*...

T. ...Yeah...

J. Did they have to do any...

T. Yeah, rationing...

J. ...super drastic things...like...where was their water... where did they get their water?

T. Yeah, well that was off the ship...O.K....um...all right...

J. What were they...like, were they...they were in the ocean, right?

T. Oh, yeah...O.K....here it starts...any more about them in the ocean...in...the...ocean...and...Yeah and I got to describe more how their morale got higher and higher...

J. Tell them how he got the morale higher...how did he get

them going? Did he tell nice stories...Did they...you know ...did he...

T. Yeah...

J. Or did he...like did they catch fish at all. Did they have anything to catch fish with? Were there any attacks by sharks? or did they...

T. ...yeah...

J. Were they scared? Were they really super scared about the whales or anything?

T. ...Yeah...There are a lot of big...killer whales down there...

J. Yeah...there's a lot of sharks, I know that...

T. Yeah...

J. Like, were they rubber rafts or what?

T. Well, I got to say the date because the clipper ships. O.K. what kind of ship...clipper...You know, it's back in 18 something or other. 18...

J. O.K. Um...

T. Um...date...1881...

J. O.K. yeah, well, that's what I was wondering...did they have modern provisions...?

T. ...Yeah...

J. Did they have modern anything that was...

T. Or should I say that their lifeboats and all that were old stuif...

J. Ah huh...like they didn't have a motor on the boat...it was pure rowing and manpower and...

T. Yeah...ok...old...what kind of...how should I say that... Oh, were...Was equipment old? Was it...

J. Like was it modern to them? Did they think it was...for them was it pretty good stuff or was it old...

T. Oh, yeah...

J. ...you know, kind of medium or...old...and...um...

T. ...old...old material or old...

J. ...like did they have to...did they do any rationing?

T. ...yeah...

J. Where did they get supplies? Did they bring food from the ship or what?

T. Yeah...well, they got it off the ship before it sank...old supplies...did they ration...

J. Was the food O.K.?...or do you think it got...soggy or...?

T. Yeah, old food...yeah, all right...let's see, what's another of

my questions...is it boring? I mean, should I add any more exciting...

J. No. . . Yeah, like the...like I'm not saying it's boring because it's not, it's pretty exciting...

T. Yeah...

J. ...but add...like if you can add something about...

T. ...the sharks...

J. Yeah, sharks...and did the guys fight amongst each other...

T. Yeah, I was going to...mutiny or something like that...

J. Yeah, did any of them...like, want to just die or...

T. Yeah...want to swim off...

J. Yeah, try to make it by himself...

T. O.K. let's see...what needs improvement?

J. Improvement...it was pretty...we've been kind of covering...

T. Yeah...

J. So I guess maybe...

T. Yeah, I guess we got everything...

J. O.K.

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The Teacher's Response

Because this monograph is particularly about small group response sessions themselves, I will not describe in detail what happens to a paper after it has been revised. I will, however, briefly outline the subsequent steps to set the whole process in context.

1. If I have not been part of the response group, the writer may choose to have a brief conference with me before writing the final draft.

2. The student staples the final draft, typed and double-spaced or in ink and written on every other line, to the original draft and hands it in.

3. I read the final draft after skimming the original and then I:
   - Underline (without identifying) any mechanical, spelling, or structural errors. (I use discretion, of course, with individual students by choosing *which* errors it would be most helpful to point out.)
   - Write comments on the content of the paper at one side of the text or at the end. I attempt to make these comments specific and explanatory, not simply laudatory ("good!") or judgmental ("weak point").

The emphasis in my comments is on being understandable to the student so that a particular way of writing can be either eliminated or repeated in future papers. Here are some examples of helpful and non-helpful comments:

a. Not "good comparison," but "this comparison helps me imagine the size of that dog."

b. Not "weak point," but "you haven't given me enough background about what specifically happened at the party to let me understand why you felt this way."

c. Not "unclear," but "what *is* the connection you see between inflation and automobile production?"

This method of commenting might seem to take more time, but because response groups have eliminated many of the more obvious problems in student papers, it actually does not. And in the long run, the more I make specific the comments, the *fewer* times I have to repeat them over the course of a semester or a school year. Also, because the final papers end up in the students' writing folders, I can ask them to refer back to previous papers before completing current ones.

4. Before making any entry into a record or grade book, I hand back the papers and the students do the following:

- In the spaces between the lines, they correct any errors underlined. If a word is misspelled, that word is written on the student's personal spelling list in the writing folder.
- Also, in the spaces between the lines, the students rewrite individual sentences for clarification.

When these changes have been completed, the student again hands in the paper and I check it over. *Now* the paper is finished and can be entered in the record book. I find that this way of handling papers eliminates the discouraging reaction where, in the past, after I handed back papers, students briefly glanced at the comments or the grade and then tossed them away.

EVALUATING RESPONSE GROUP WORK

If students have never experienced writing response groups before, it takes a while, probably one to two months, before they can be weaned from dependence upon immediate teacher evaluation of their writing and are comfortable with the longer process of response and revision. I find it imperative to remind students consistently of the value I place on this process. And, besides my daily attitude in class, my method of grading each quarter's work further emphasizes the importance I place on response and revision.

REPORT CARD EVALUATION

Below is a supplemental report card form I attach to the regulation one-sheet affair where all the different subject grades are paraded next to each other.

Language Arts / Literature / Personal Reading **Grade Report**

SECOND QUARTER
EIGHTH GRADE

Name: _____
Teacher: _____
Section: _____

Student/Teacher Evaluation Form

1. *Language Arts:* One class period per day this quarter has been devoted to composition and literature. All writing is kept in the student's own folder—along with a record of the books he/she has read.

	Excellent		*Satisfactory*		*Needs improvement*	
	Stu.	*Tea.*	*Stu.*	*Tea.*	*Stu.*	*Tea.*
A. *Composition*						
1. Original Drafts completed on time.						
2. Thoughtful response given to writing partner(s)						
3. Revisions made on original draft.						
4. Correction of underlined errors on final draft						
5. Misspelled words added to Personal Spelling Chart						

6. *Spelling*
   a. Record of weekly lists and study methods
      _____ _____ _____ _____ _____
   b. Record of test scores
      _____ _____ _____ _____ _____
   c. Personal spelling chart up to date:
      Yes: _____ No: _____

7. *Mechanical Skills to Work On*
   _____ eliminating run-on sentences
   _____ eliminating unnecessary sentence fragments
   _____ improving capitalization
   _____ improving punctuation, particularly _____

B. *Literature*

	Excellent		*Satisfactory*		*Needs improvement*	
	Stu.	*Tea.*	*Stu.*	*Tea.*	*Stu.*	*Tea.*
1. Understanding of stories read						
2. Participation in seminar discussions						
3. Quality of written work for seminar discussions						

FINAL LANGUAGE ARTS GRADE _____

II. *Personal Reading:* One class period each day this quarter has been devoted to personal reading, except for the students attending art class. All students have been expected to read at home as well.

A. My goal for the second quarter was to read _____ books.

B. I read _____ books during the second quarter.

C. Personal Reading Record completed thoroughly and up to date.
Excellent: ___ Satisfactory: ___ Needs Improvement: ___
Comments:

Student Signature: _____

Teacher Signature: _____

Parent Signature: _____

• • • • • • • • • • •

This form is eventually signed by the student, the teacher, and a parent, so it makes clear to all parties what is expected of students in the class. And, since all writing completed during a quarter is kept in a folder in the classroom, there is tangible evidence of involvement and progress over nine weeks' time. After this evaluation form is completed, it is stapled inside the student's writing folder as a reference for describing progress in the next quarter.

STUDENT-TEACHER EVALUATION SESSIONS

The appropriate columns of the report card form described above are completed by the student before I see it. I usually spend the last week of each quarter having a brief conference with each student in the class. We discuss the areas listed on the form and I fill in the teacher's columns by referring to the student's writing folder, my grade book, and my anecdotal record book, all three of which are before us as we talk.

This system makes the unreasonable task of assigning a single letter grade to an entire quarter's work less disturbing, primarily because the grade, required by the school administration and parents, is adequately documented and discussed, and is ultimately arrived at through agreement between the student and myself.

Coping with Problems

Often, when talking with other teachers who use response groups in the classroom, I've found that certain problems frequently surface. These are *real* problems and, like most aspects of classroom life, cannot be eliminated quickly. However, steps can be taken to help, so do not be discouraged if:

1. *Some students do not want to share their papers with other students.* This may be an indication of a student's lack of confidence in her writing ability. Initially, arrange for frequent opportunities for the whole class to respond to papers so that students become accustomed to the process. Then, if some students are still reluctant, work alone with them or in a small group with other reluctant students until they feel more comfortable with this process.

On the other hand, some student writers do not need small group response because they have evolved their own revision strategies. Accepting this, I usually ask the students to give response to others, even if they do not always ask for it themselves.

2. *Some students make superficial or non-helpful comments.* As in the suggestion above, whole-class response to papers helps underline the importance of specific, thoughtful comments. Also, it is helpful to tape groups in progress, and, after listening to the tapes, play back to the class examples of particularly useful responses. Class discussion of the characteristics of a helpful response partner help focus attention on what is expected in groups. If all else fails, speak individually with students about what is lacking in their response to writing partners.

3. *Some students do not feel they are helped by their writing groups.* Examine the drafts of such student papers, looking especially for suggestions which have been made by the group and consequent revisions made by the writer. If necessary, speak to the writer's response group about the nature of their suggestions. Make your own suggestions to the writer and perhaps recommend that the writer try joining another group.

4. *Some students fool around in the group and ignore the work at hand.* Be particularly alert to a lack of revision in their papers and specifically comment on it. Also, sit with troublesome groups and model response behavior for them. If these methods fail, either disband the troublesome group or LOWER THE BOOM in whatever way fits your particular style as a teacher.

5. *Some students have well-written sections eliminated by their response group.* While checking drafts you may come across lines or sections which you think excellent but which disappear in the final version. Talk with the student about this situation, explaining why you think the eliminated writing is strong and why you would not eliminate it. However, always leave the final choice up to the writer.

Summary

Students will, of course, develop differently in their abilities to respond helpfully to each other's work. However, I believe that one of the most important factors in determining how deeply students get involved with the revision process is the value they place on response group interaction.

I can remember when I first used response groups in my classes how impatient I became with the students' initial superficial comments, the rapidity with which they raced through each other's papers, and the final inevitable question: "Should we copy it over now?" Any my reply: "You're *not* copying it over, you're *revising* it. If there aren't any changes you want to make, then just hand it in." Then the questioning student would turn to another and say: "She said we didn't have to copy it over if we didn't want to." In those days I probably called the whole class to attention and gave (yet again) an earnest explication of the differences between recopying and revision. Predictably, nothing would change on the basis of that talk.

I have since learned to ignore all but the most blatant misunderstandings of the word *revision* and to wait. To wait until I can tape a notable exchange within a response group, play it back to the class, and ask them what they hear happening. We discuss what they hear and then, if it is available, look at the first draft of the paper in question and at the subsequent revision. I ask the class which they like better and why. Then we go on to other things, but I repeat the same process every time I tape a session. And, at the same time, I emphasize in my written comments instances of thoughtful revision I see in the papers I collect from the students. Slowly, as their perception of the differences between their first and second drafts grows, their involvement in the revision process deepens. But it takes time and continual nurturing, an effort sustained by my belief in the evolutionary development of an individual's writing ability.

To emphasize to your students your commitment to this writing process, it is helpful to take the following steps:

1. At the beginning of the school year or semester, be a response "group" of one for your students. Before students can offer their work for response in a small group, they must have a sense of themselves as students who *can* write. Consequently using small groups in a class of "remedial" writers is difficult. First, the *teacher* must be the *encouraging* responder who points out, again and again, what the students *can* do, at the same time designing lessons to help with the areas of major difficulty.

2. Don't be a strict critic of students' first efforts at small group response; instead, find areas to praise, to hold up as models, to encourage. Initially, talk generally to the whole class about areas for improvement rather than singling out a group for specific criticism. Some students learn best from seeing what other students do rather than from listening to the teacher.
3. Allow your actions to serve always as a model of responsive behavior. Question, comment, then question again. As all successful teachers know, the art of asking the right question at the right time is crucial. The "right" question is usually one which provokes thought and further action on the part of the person questioned.
4. Be a group member yourself and contribute a piece of writing which needs response. If your classroom situation will not permit you to join a student group, then try to join a writing group comprised of other teachers or friends. A writing teacher should be engaged in the writing process, somehow, somewhere.
5. Help the students to monitor their own writing development through a periodic review of their papers. Ask them to tell you the changes they notice over a period of time and then discuss your own observations.
6. At least once every two weeks, if not more often, read two versions of the same piece to the class and ask them to comment on the differences. This procedure helps students develop touchstones for making their own choices.
7. Finally, and most important, read to the students as often as possible. Have students in the class volunteer to read intriguing pieces they have found. By filling your classroom with a rich diversity of language, you are actively building the store of resources the students will bring to their writing.

For Further Reading

The following books have helped shape my teaching of writing. Their common point is respect for the learner and a belief in the interrelationship of talk and writing in the classroom.

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